

Melvin van Peebles

AIN'T NOT BOtherED

Melvin van Peebles' life story can't be traced along a single trajectory: He tried his hand as a cable car driver in San Francisco, traded some stocks, wrote a few novels - and is best known for his classic film *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song*. His first feature film raised the eyebrows of the conservative 1960s Hollywood establishment that invited him to work as a director. But he had more on his mind than fame.

By directing the politically loaded *Watermelon Man* and making *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* practically single-handedly, he played a major role in paving the way for the next generation of black American filmmakers. Despite criticism for opening up the blaxploitation genre with his film, he prefers to see the bigger picture. He is still going strong at 78 and performing with his new band Melvin van Peebles wid Laxatives ('because they get shit done').

Sandra Pfeifer meets van Peebles for an interview in his New York apartment on 56th Street. It is decorated with a giant hotdog and the backside of a skyblue 1979 VW van that seems to have crashed through the wall. Fumes chug from its exhaust pipe. 'You see?' He laughs, 'It's still trying to escape...'

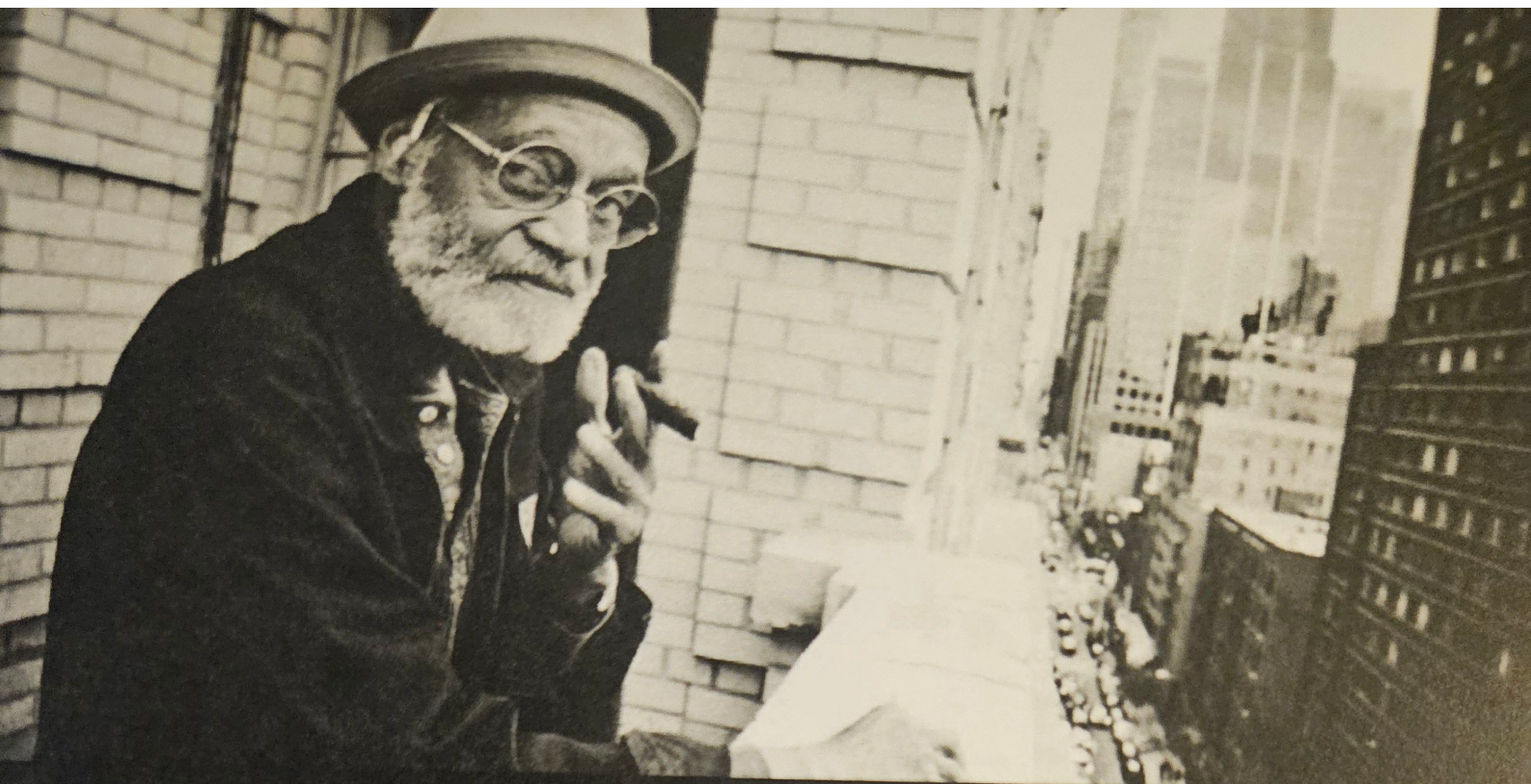
Melvin van Peebles

AIN'T NOT BOTHERED

Melvin van Peebles' life story can't be traced along a single trajectory: He tried his hand as a cable car driver in San Francisco, traded some stocks, wrote a few novels - and is best known for his classic film *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song*. His first feature film raised the eyebrows of the conservative 1960s Hollywood establishment that invited him to work as a director. But he had more on his mind than fame.

By directing the politically loaded *Watermelon Man* and making *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* practically single-handedly, he played a major role in paving the way for the next generation of black American filmmakers. Despite criticism for opening up the blaxploitation genre with his film, he prefers to see the bigger picture. He is still going strong at 78 and performing with his new band Melvin van Peebles wid Laxatives ('because they get shit done').

Sandra Pfeifer meets van Peebles for an interview in his New York apartment on 56th Street. It is decorated with a giant hotdog and the backside of a skyblue 1979 VW van that seems to have crashed through the wall. Fumes chug from its exhaust pipe. 'You see?' He laughs, 'It's still trying to escape...'



Did things just happen to you?

I have a great advantage: I am a piece of shit. And so I don't have to live up to anything.

Your first feature, *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*, was shot in Paris in 1967?

I got inspired by some French writer and wrote a flattering script for the French. With that I was able to get my director's card to make a film out of it. Then something hilarious happened: I was at a party where I met this very well dressed black American guy who turned out to be the curator for the San Francisco film festival. I came back to the US with my film as a French delegate to the festival. No one knew I was American. It was very embarrassing politically. And here I was: an embarrassment. The film, which won the film festival, was made by an American (in

France) because he couldn't have done it here. After that the Hollywood studios got interested in working with me because all these big established companies were told to take in minorities.

You turned down the initial offers from Hollywood. Why?

If I had taken the job, no other minority would have gotten a shot. I would have been the excuse that they didn't need to hire anybody else. So with no money to go back to Paris, I was back on the streets of New York. Begging... as usual. It didn't bother me.

What made you agree to do *Watermelon Man*?

I made the film under the provision that we shoot it in Hollywood to break the unions and to make it possible for everyone else. There were a couple of other members of



**I HAVE
A GREAT
ADVANTAGE:
I AM A PIECE
OF SHIT. AND SO
I DON'T HAVE
TO LIVE UP TO
ANYTHING.**

minorities that were hired to do movies - but those movies weren't shot there. It was like sneaking a lady off to a different place so her parents won't know. When I was a kid, I would pick a fight with the toughest guy in school. I got beaten up but nobody would bother me after that. The toughest guy in the film world was Hollywood. That was strategic planning for the future. I knew what I was doing.

Has your strategy worked out that way?

It was okay. At times the minorities would be angry at me because they thought that a revolution has to happen step after step in a certain way. But someone has to make the first step. It was like getting mad with the man who went to war in Kentucky instead of Buffalo although he made the win happen.

without permission.



How did you keep going?

Something came along, which I never dreamt of, and that was Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song. I own everything on that film. Not because I am a genius but because nobody wanted to come in with me on that. They asked me to change the title at first. My distributor said, 'I don't understand what that means,' and I replied, 'My audience will'.

How have your efforts been recognised?

In France they have given me the Legion of Honour, which is nice. But nobody ever called me up and asked, 'Can I help you, Mel?' or covered a song of mine. No problem... There are only two ways to be rich: Have everything or don't need shit.

How did you get Earth, Wind and Fire to perform your song for the film?

My secretary was fucking the bandleader. They were great guys. They just didn't have their shot yet. That was their very first album. Coincidence is accident meeting up with practice. You know what I mean...

**MY
DISTRIBUTOR
SAID,
'I DON'T
UNDERSTAND
WHAT THAT
MEANS,'
AND I REPLIED,
'MY AUDIENCE
WILL'.**



How did you keep going?

Something came along, which I never dreamt of, and that was Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song. I own everything on that film. Not because I am a genius but because nobody wanted to come in with me on that. They asked me to change the title at first. My distributor said, 'I don't understand what that means,' and I replied, 'My audience will'.

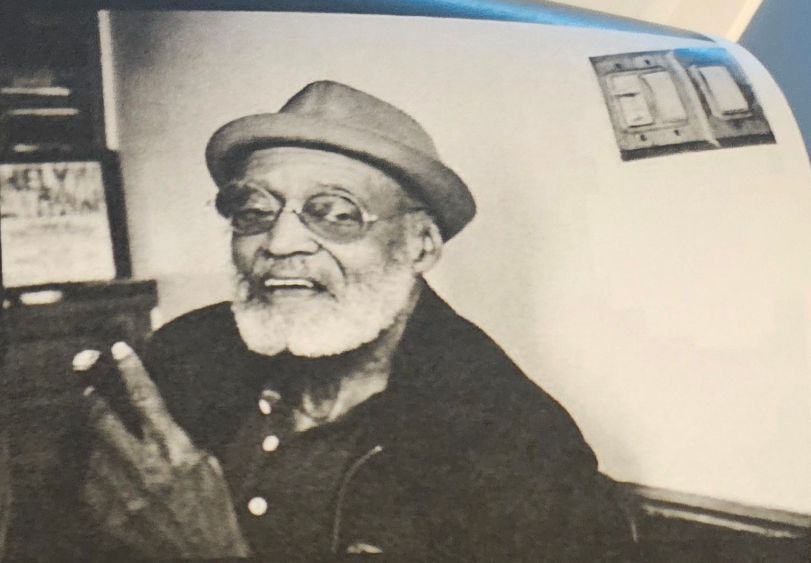
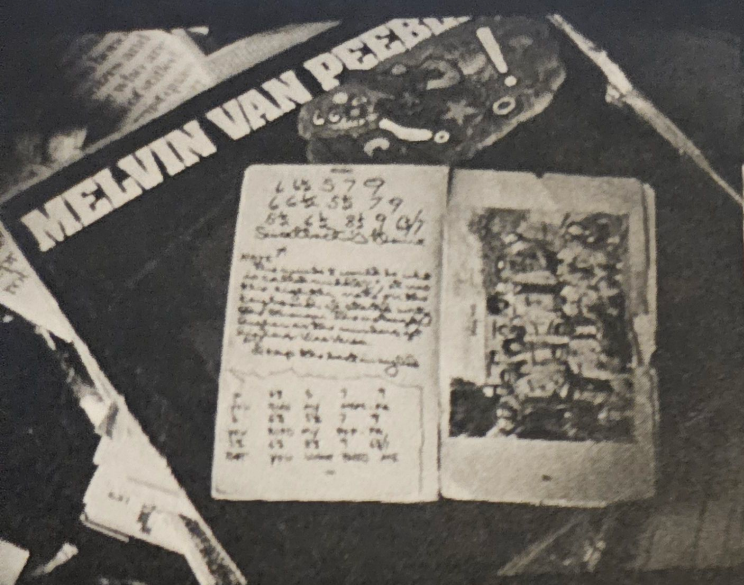
How have your efforts been recognised?

In France they have given me the Legion of Honour, which is nice. But nobody ever called me up and asked, 'Can I help you, Mel?' or covered a song of mine. No problem... There are only two ways to be rich: Have everything or don't need shit.

How did you get Earth, Wind and Fire to perform your song for the film?

My secretary was fucking the bandleader. They were great guys. They just didn't have their shot yet. That was their very first album. Coincidence is accident meeting up with practice. You know what I mean...

**MY
DISTRIBUTOR
SAID,
'I DON'T
UNDERSTAND
WHAT THAT
MEANS,'
AND I REPLIED,
'MY AUDIENCE
WILL'.**



Is it true that you were shooting with the Hells Angels?

Well they were a gang hoping to be the Hells Angels. At one point they wanted to get tough ... The main guy, while discussing with me, took out his knife to clean his fingernails. To make a statement I snapped my finger. 'You got knives and guns, we got rifles. Shut up! We understood each other. Ain't very complicated.

How did you manage to pull off Sweetback, from producing to acting, by yourself?

Let me explain something: I hate getting up in the morning. But I am out there... running. I don't like it but I prefer that to eating shit. You do what you gotta do. Yeah it's gonna hurt, but after you get over the pain you cruise along.

Did you ever fear failure?
That's called life.

You also were the first black trader at the American Stock Exchange because you lost a bet?

I was discussing a business deal with a friend and we were arguing over the percentage point. My friend said it's gonna make X and

I said it's gonna make Y. If I lost, well... then I had to go and be a trader.

Do you worry about things?

I never worry. That doesn't mean that things are going to come out alright. I think I exemplify the goofy guy who used to be on the cover of MAD magazine (which I was translating into French when I lived in Paris), saying 'What? Me worry?... Get outta here.

What is your life philosophy?

Seriously? There are so many songs. They categorized the songs 'blues' but they're not. There are whole blues philosophies about life... (sings): 'Walking down the street, seems everyone I meet, greets me with a friendly 'Hello,' I guess, I am just a lucky so-and-so... and all the birds and bees are also neighbourly, they twitter where ever I go, I guess, I am just a lucky so-and-so... in my bank account, I have to confess, I am slippin', but that don't bother me... I kinda dream, night and day is sweet, I guess I am just a lucky so-and-so.'

If you can go with that... A